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ABSTRACT

This study translated data reflecting life satisfaction from a large national Japanese survey into English. Perceptions of life satisfaction in Japan were compared to those in the United States. Data for U.S. subjects were taken from Gallup Polls in 1979, 1989, and 1990; Japanese data were based on personal interviews taken during the National Sample Polls conducted by the Cabinet Public Information Office in 1978 and 1990. U.S. respondents were much more likely to express satisfaction with their lives than Japanese respondents. U.S. subjects expressed significantly greater satisfaction with their housing, income, leisure, jobs, their lives as a whole, and had more optimistic views of their futures than did Japanese subjects. Given the downward trend of the U.S. economy compared to the relative stability of the Japanese economy, these are particularly interesting findings. However, one must be cautious when comparing personal ratings across cultures. Terms like "satisfaction" may have different meanings in the U.S. and Japan. Also, the difficulty in inferring private beliefs from public statements in Japan must be taken into account in the present results. It might be argued that the Japanese were simply attempting to present themselves as humble about their lives. It appears clear from the present data that personal satisfaction in Japan has not kept pace with the economic achievements of the nation. (LLL)

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LIFE SATISFACTION IN JAPAN VS. THE U.S.A.: 1978-1990

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The Japanese post-war "economic miracle" has become a model for struggling nations throughout the world. During the quarter century following World War II, the Japanese economy rose from virtual bankruptcy to one of, if not the, strongest in the world.

One suggested explanation for this achievement has been the Japanese group orientation, particularly their willingness to forego personal well-being for the well-being of the "tribe" (Christopher, 1983). Until recently, people were willing to work hard in order to achieve the stability and security provided by a strong national economy. Over the past decade, however, the Japanese have expressed increasing frustration over their personal living standards. Japan's per Capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is one of the highest in the world (JETRO, 1990). However, a recent national survey found that a large proportion of Japanese citizens felt they were not as "well-off" personally as their national economy would suggest (The Economic Planning Agency of the Japanese Government, 1988).

One reason for this gap between GDP and satisfaction may be the high cost of living in Japan. As more Japanese travel abroad, they are learning that they don't live as well as their incomes would allow in other countries (Lehner, 1990). The actual buying power of the average Japanese is lower than that of the U.S., and they are tenth in the world in per capita consumption (The Economic Planning Agency of the Japanese Government, 1988). The prohibitive cost of land and housing, high prices for everything from food to entertainment, and little

reduction in their notoriously long working hours have led increasing numbers of Japanese to question why their personal standards of living have not kept pace with the economic miracle achieved on a national level.

Perhaps more important, however, is the change in values that has followed the achievement of economic stability. According to annual public opinion polls conducted by the Management and Coordination Agency, from the end of World War II until 1979 a majority of Japanese said they valued material wealth over spiritual psychological wealth. From 1979 onward, though, there has been an increasing tendency to value spiritual, psychological wealth over material wealth. In the 1988 poll, only 37 percent of all respondants put greater value on material wealth (Iwao, 1988).

With this increasing emphasis on personal well-being, many national surveys have focused on the perceived 'quality of life' in Japan. Indicators of economic, social and environmental living conditions are published regularly.

But psychologists, at least those in the West, have long recognized that favorable living conditions do not always result in subjective well-being (e.g. Campbell, 1972; Levine, Miyake & Lee, 1989). Direct measures of the psychological quality of life, however, have been rare in Japan. Those data which do exist are rarely translated outside of the in Japanese language, resulting in little comparison with data from other countries.

The present study translated data reflecting life

satisfaction from a large national Japanese survey into English. We then compared perceptions of life satisfaction in Japan to those United States. We brought together comparable existing data from national surveys taken separately in each country in order to compare perceived, or at least expressed, life satisfaction in the two countries; and, to compare changes over time in the two countries.

METHOD

Survey Samples

Data for U.S. subjects were taken from four separate Gallup Polls utilizing either telephone or personal surveys. Overall life satisfaction was taken from a 1990 sample (N = 1242 (622 males and 620 females)). Satisfaction on the five specific life domains were taken from a 1989 survey (N = 1001 (501 males, 500 females)). To compare changes over time, overall life satisfaction responses were taken from a survey of 1500 individuals in 1979. Perceptions of the future were taken from a 1990 survey of 917 individuals (Gallup, 1979; Gallup, 1989; Gallup, 1990a and 1990b).

Japanese data were based on personal interviews taken during the National Sample Polls conducted by the Cabinet Public Information Office (1990) in 1978 and 1990. These reports, published in Japanese, were translated into English by one of the present authors. The 1990 survey included responses from face-to-face interviews with a national sample of 7,629 adults (3,540 males and 4089 females). Sample sizes for the 1978 data were not

available.

Survey Questions

From the recent surveys, we selected comparable questions from each nations which reflected life satisfaction in five domains: housing, family, leisure time, job and income. We also examined ratings of overall life satisfaction for the surveys at both points in time. (Data for the individual domains were unavailable for the earlier time periods). For all questions, U.S.respondants had been asked whether they were "satisfied," "dissatisfied," or had "no opinion or uncertain." Japanese respondants answered on a five-point--"very satisfied," "satisfied," "no opinion/uncertain," "unsatisfied," "very unsatisfied," For purposes of comparison with the U.S. data, the two "satisfied" responses were combined, and the two "unsatisfied" responses were combine. Finally, we compared responses to similar questions about the future: For U.S. subjects: Compared to the way things are now, do you expect your life as a whole to be better or worse "by the year 2,000." In the Japanese survey the phrase "by the year 2,000" was replaced by the term "in the future."

RESULTS

A series of chi-square analyses examined cross-national, sex, and time period differences in responses to the survey questions. Group means for these analyses are presented in the accompanying figures. (Except where otherwise noted, df=2 for all analyses).

Overall satisfaction. In the 1990 surveys, 66.8% of the Japanese expressed satisfaction with their life as a whole, compared to 81.0% in the Americans sample ($X^2 = 6.20$, $p<.05$). More American males expressed overall satisfaction (81.0%) than Japanese males (62.2%) ($X^2 = 10.08$, $p<.01$). Although more American females expressed life satisfaction (82.0%) than Japanese females (70.8%), these differences were not significant ($X^2 = 4.29$, ns).

In the 1978/1979 surveys, fewer respondants in both countries expressed satisfaction with their lives as a whole than they did in 1990 (Japanese: 64.3% (1978), 66.8% (1990); U.S.: 77.0% (1979), 81.0% (1990). These differences across time, however, were not significant for either country (X^2 (U.S.) = .52, ns; X^2 (Japan) = .14, ns). Cross-national differences in 1978 were also not significant ($X^2 = 4.52$, ns).

Data for the five life domains were taken from the Japanese 1990 survey and the U.S. 1989 survey.

Housing. Fewer Japanese (64.9%) expressed satisfaction with their housing conditions than did U.S. subjects (87.0%) ($X^2 = 14.10$, $p<.01$).

Income. A minority of Japanese (43.2%) but a majority of U.S. subjects (69.0%) expressed satisfaction with their present income ($X^2 = 14.00$, $p<.01$).

Family life. Although somewhat fewer Japanese subjects (87.7%) expressed satisfaction with their family life than did U.S. subjects (94.0%), these differences were not significant (X^2

= 2.59, ns.).

Leisure. Cross-national differences were strongest of all on this life domain. A minority of Japanese (46.5%) but a majority of U.S. subjects (87.0%) expressed satisfaction with their leisure time ($X^2 = 37.18$, $p<.01$).

Job. A significantly greater number of U.S. subjects (76.0%) expressed satisfaction with their jobs than did Japanese subjects (65.5%) ($X^2 = 12.16$, $p<.01$).

Perceptions of the Future. The vast majority of U.S. subjects (77.0%) expected to be better off "in the year 2,000" than they are today. In Japan, however, a minority of subjects (23.4%) expected to be better off "in the future" than they are now. For the Japanese, 58.4% of all respondants expected life to be about the same, while 11.1% expected it to be worse. For U.S. Subjects, 12.0% expected life to be about the same, while 8.0 % expected it to be worse. The remainder of subjects expressed no opinion. These cross-national differences were highly significant (X^2 (df=3) = 61.35, $p <.01$).

DISCUSSION

The most striking finding of the present study was that U.S. respondants were much more likely to express satisfaction with their lives than Japanese respondants. U.S. subjects expressed significantly greater satifaction with their housing, income, leisure, jobs, their lives as a whole, and had more optimistic views of their futures than did Japanese subjects. Given the downward trend of the American economy, compared to the relative

stability of the Japanese economy, these are particularly interesting findings.

One must be cautious when comparing personal ratings across cultures. Terms like "satisfaction" may have very different meanings in the U.S. and Japan. Also, the difficulty in inferring private beliefs from public statements in Japan must be taken into account in the present results (Barlund, 1975). It might be argued, for example, that the Japanese were simply attempting to present themselves as humble about their lives.

The overwhelming tendency for U.S. respondants to express greater satisfaction cannot, however, be taken lightly. It appears clear from the present data that personal satisfaction in Japan has not kept pace with the economic achievements of the nation. Further, as argued earlier, there is evidence that there is less willingness to tolerate this discrepancy during the last decade than there was in the past. If this is so, then, personal satisfaction may need to be more directly addressed in Japan as the nation moves forward.

In the United States, the notion of an individual's right to pursue personal happiness emerged at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, and has largely defined our culture--for better and for worse--ever since. As the notion of individual happiness becomes increasingly salient in Japan, planners may want to carefully examine the U.S. experience to see some of the possibilities and problems that will likely emerge in their country in the coming years.

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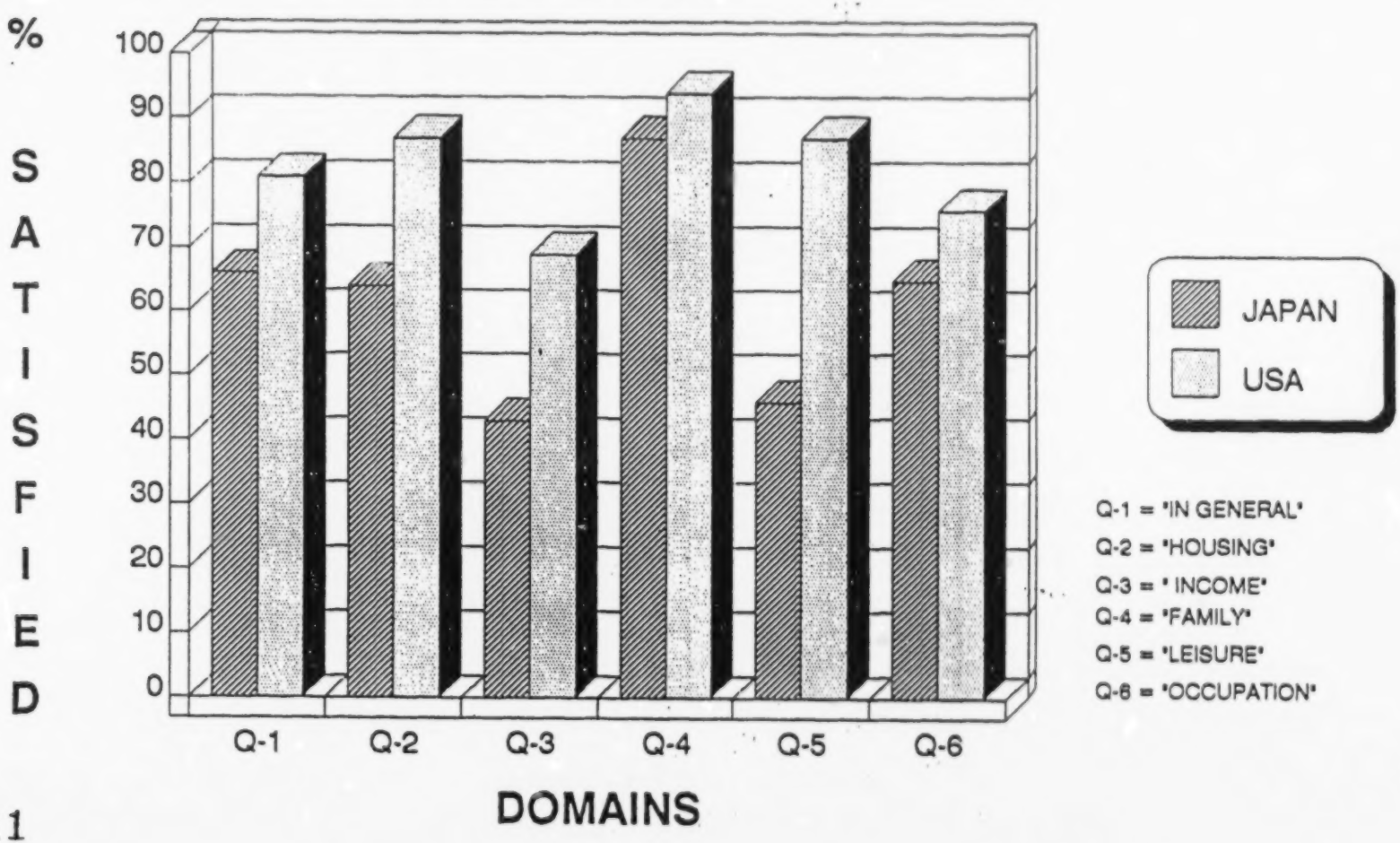
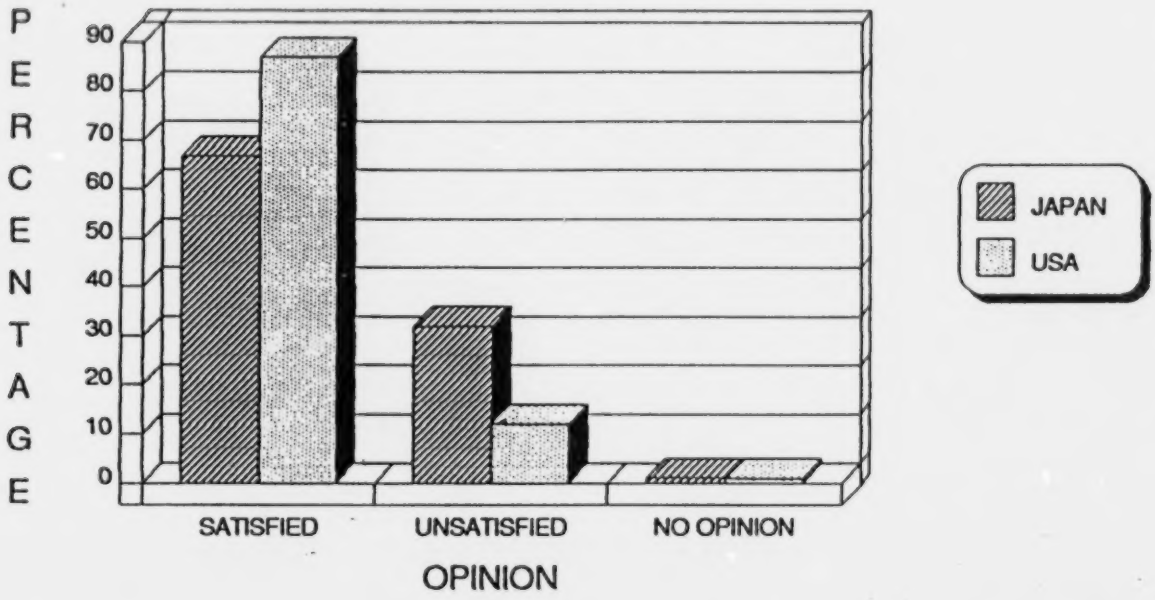
PERCEIVED QUALITY OF LIFE:

JAPAN VS USA



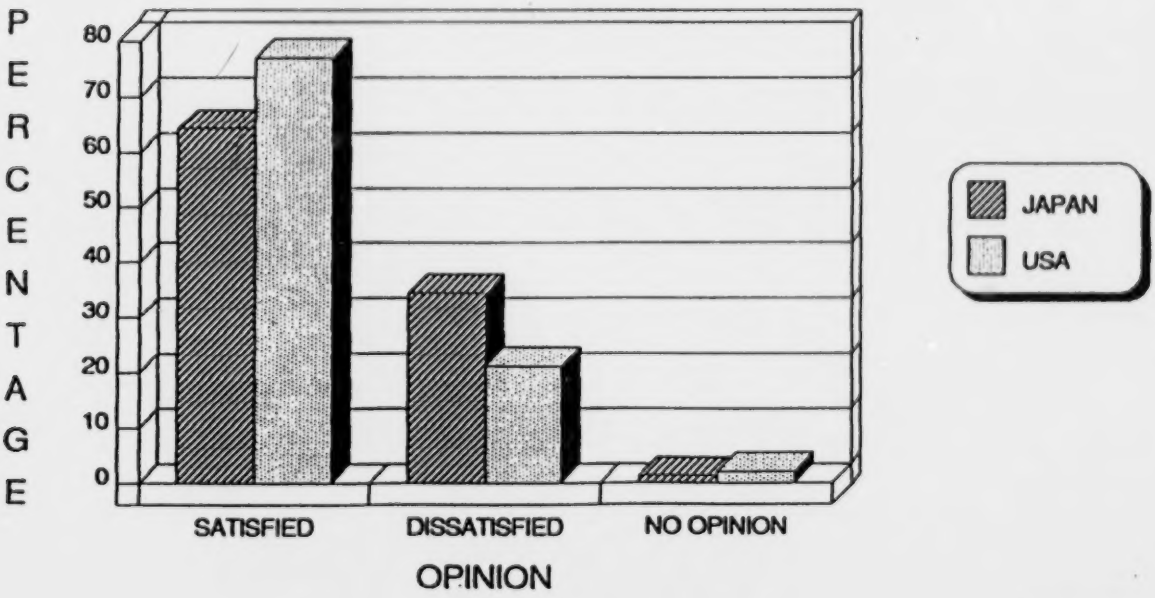
SATISFACTION WITH LIFE (1990)

JAPAN VS USA



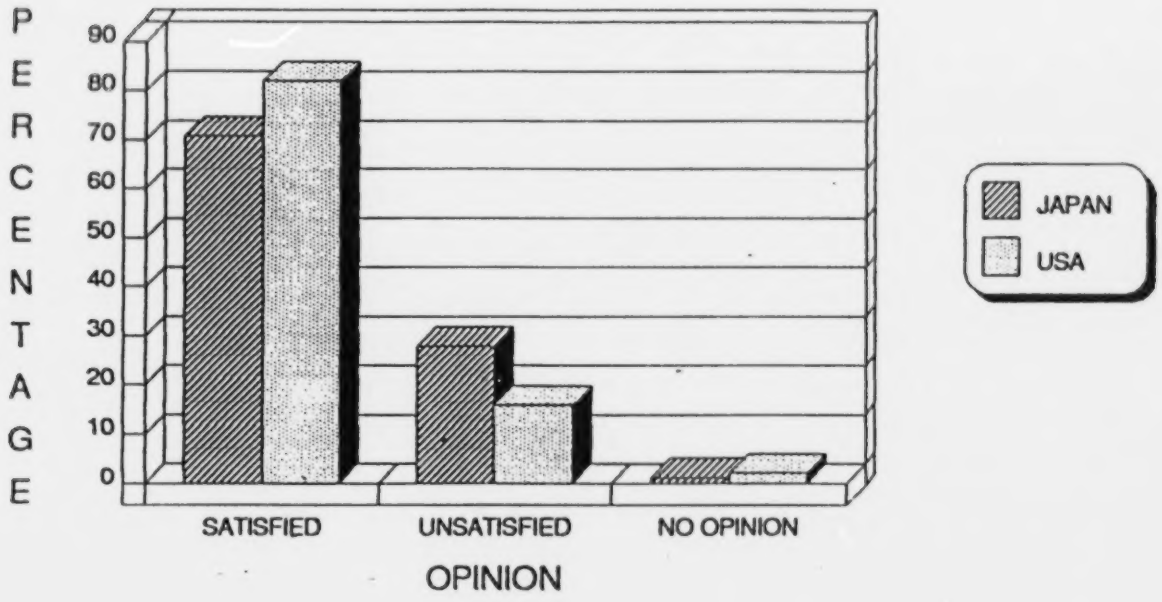
SATISFACTION WITH LIFE (1978/1979)

JAPAN VS UNITED STATES



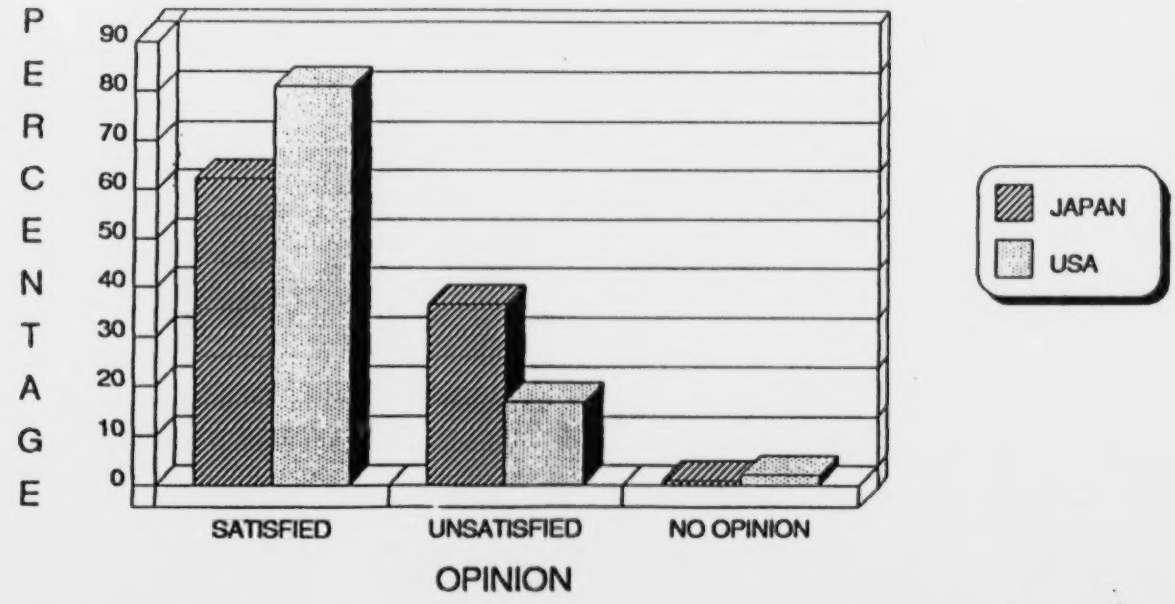
SATISFACTION WITH LIFE

FEMALES



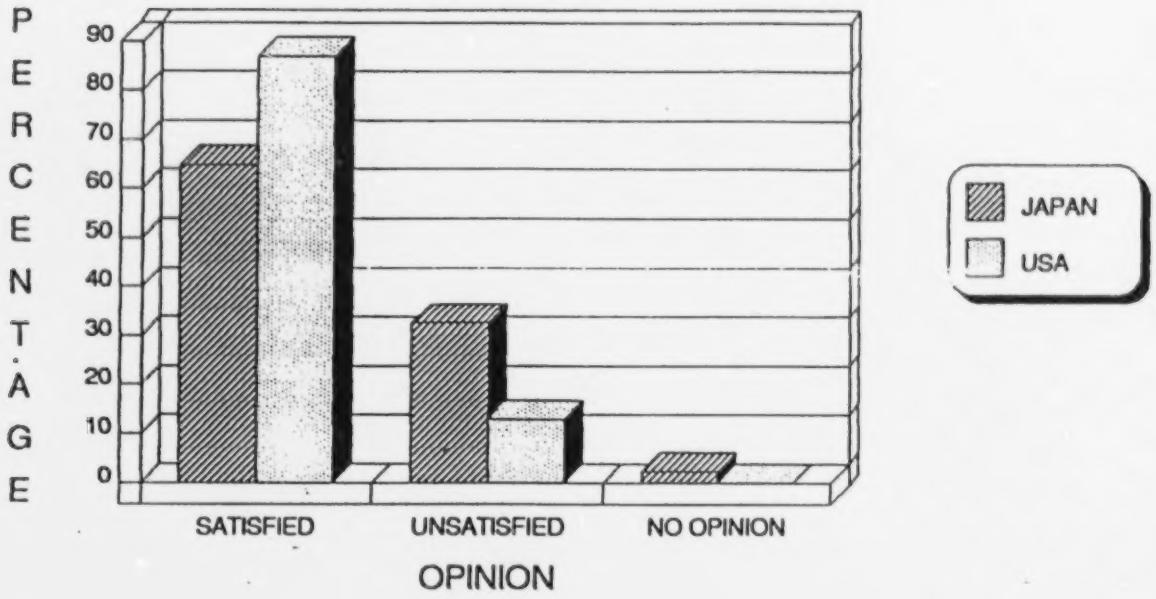
SATISFACTION WITH LIFE

MALES



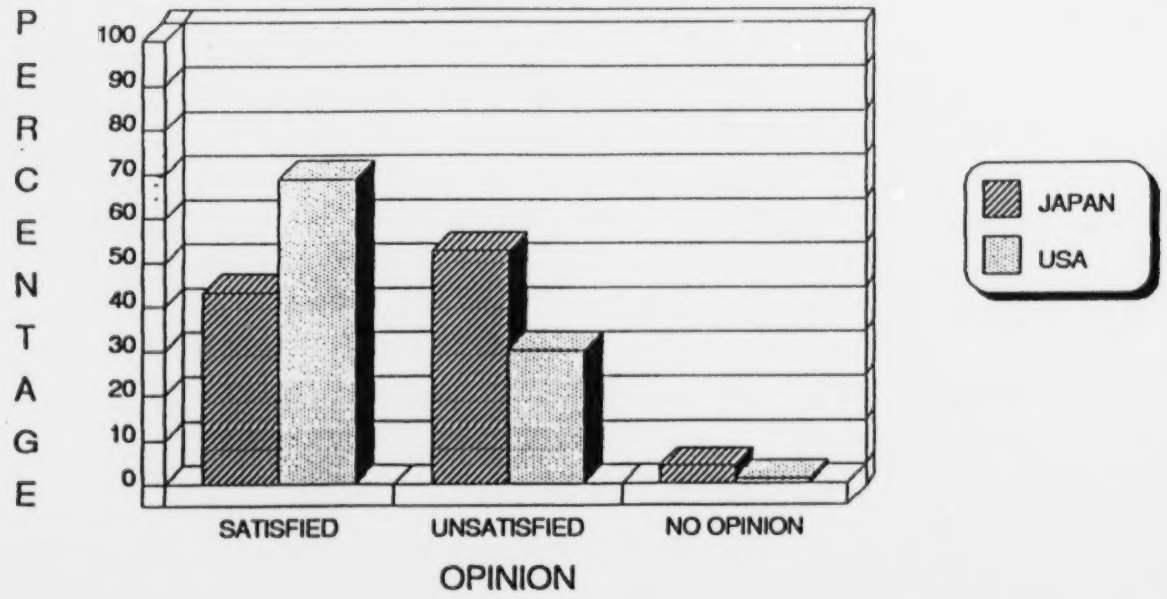
SATISFACTION WITH HOUSING

JAPAN VS USA



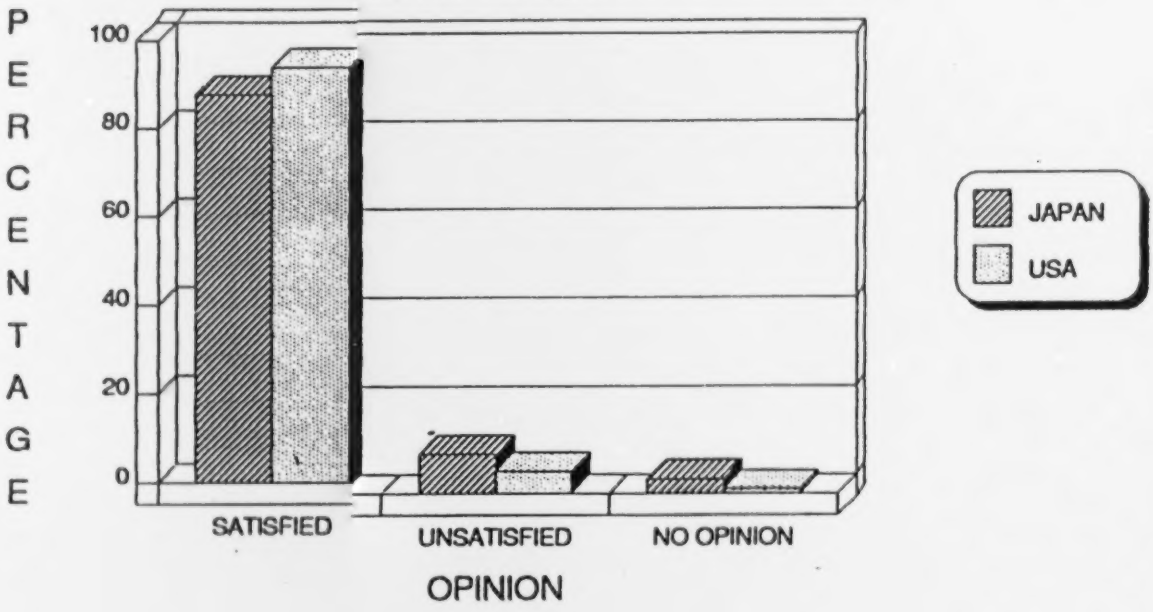
SATISFACTION WITH INCOME

JAPAN VS USA



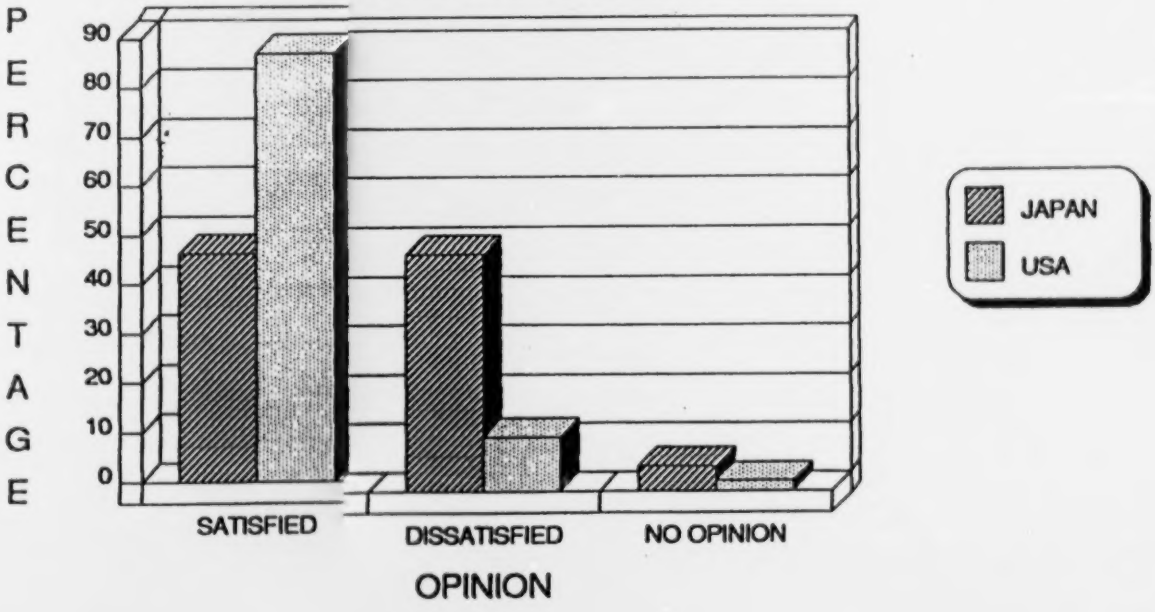
SATISFACTION WITH FAMILY LIFE

JAPAN VS USA



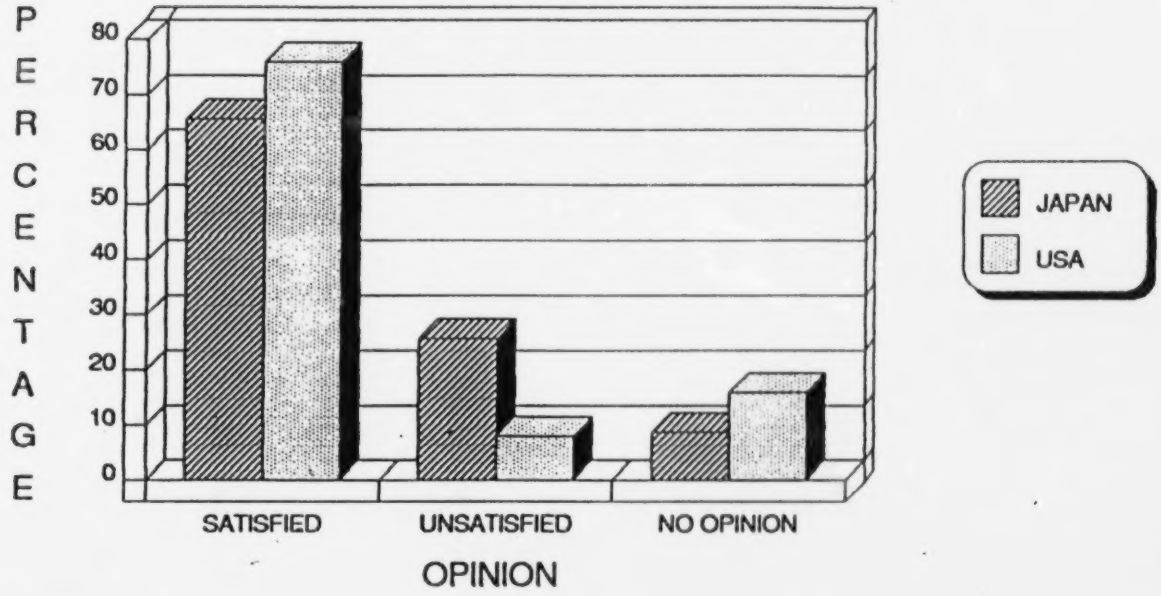
SATISFACTION WITH LEISURE

JAPAN VS UNITED STATES



SATISFACTION WITH JOB

JAPAN VS USA



EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

JAPAN VS UNITED STATES